



## 'Quality' contact post-separation/divorce: A review of the literature



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### ABSTRACT

Concern with the impact on children of discontinued parent-child relationships following parental separation or divorce has resulted in a depth of empirical knowledge in the maintenance of those relationships through the medium of 'contact'. While research consistently demonstrates that post-separation/divorce parenting arrangements work best when they are informally arranged between two parents who are committed to making those plans work in the interests of their children, the emotive nature of the separation/divorce experience for many families may demand formal and legal regulation. Research with families involved in post-separation/divorce contact fails to identify a solitary magic ingredient that makes contact work or not work; rather a wide range of factors which operate interactively, interdependently and dynamically, with the attitudes, actions and interactions of the key family players shaping contact and determining its quality. This paper provides a critical review of the international literature on post-separation/divorce contact, identifying and reflecting on the key ingredients or factors central to the successful occurrence of 'quality contact'. Drawing on the literature reviewed, a framework consisting of four separate yet interrelated layers is presented in order to both identify and explore these dynamic factors that quality contact is dependent upon.

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### 1.1. Introduction

Amato and Sobolewski (2004) surmise that contemporary family life and social change have positioned fathers in an invidious place. Whilst on the one hand they are expected to play a full and active part in their children's lives, the stresses and strains of modern life have resulted in many of these fathers living apart from those same children, arising from separation and/or divorce. Whether from a fathers' rights, children's rights or child welfare perspective, a burgeoning body of empirical evidence nonetheless underscores the importance for children's development of good quality *continuing* bonds with *both* parents (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Lamb & Lewis, 2004; Lamb, 2007). Consequent concern with the deleterious impact on children of tenuous or discontinued parent-child relationships following parental separation or divorce has resulted in a depth of empirical knowledge and academic interest in the maintenance of those relationships through the medium of 'contact' (Buchanan, Hunt, Bretherton, & Bream, 2001; Kaganas & Day Sclater, 2004; May & Smart, 2007; Trinder, Beek, & Connolly, 2002; Wilson, 2006).

The clear message emerging from non-legal sources of knowledge and expertise, largely drawn from the medical, sociological and psychological or 'psy' professions across multiple jurisdictions (Kaganas & Day Sclater, 2004), is that parent-child relationships are integral to outcomes for children (Andersson, 2005). Children's need for stable continuous attachments and for a positive identity dominate the argument for

continued contact with their non-resident parent (Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2002; Mahon & Moore, 2011).

While research consistently demonstrates that post-separation/divorce parenting arrangements work best when they are informally arranged between two co-operative parents who are committed to making those plans work in the interests of their children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Haugen, 2010), the contentious, emotive and often conflictual nature of the separation/divorce experience for many families demands formal and legal regulation (May & Smart, 2007; Radford & Hester, 2015). However, Kaganas and Day Sclater (2004: 5) describe the legal system as 'a clumsy tool for managing complex family problems', with a limited capacity to influence the quality of the contact experience and the quality of the post-separation parent-child relationship (Trinder et al., 2002). While the law can impose arrangements for contact, its ability to influence the quality or indeed regulate the appropriateness of that contact is considerably more constrained – the subtle but crucial difference between making contact 'work' as opposed to merely ensuring that it takes place (Trinder, Connolly, Kellett, Notley, & Swift, 2006). As in other areas of law regulating parent-child relationships, Holt (2011a) commented that the debate frequently focuses its energy on the logistics of contact—location, frequency and duration—with little attention to the content and structure that contact time will take, and subsequently, with limited ability to improve or repair damaged relationships or regulate parent-child interaction or parental behaviour. Fontin, Hunt, and Scanlan (2012) concluded from their research in the UK with young adults who had experienced parental separation while under the age of 18, that structural issues are not strongly correlated with positive experiences of

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contact. Echoing research findings in other jurisdictions, [Trinder et al. \(2002\)](#) conclude that quality contact requires more than the absence of problems, and indeed the legal regulation of family relationships. Research with the families involved in post-separation/divorce contact fails to identify a solitary magic ingredient that makes contact work or not work; rather a wide range of factors which operate interactively, interdependently and dynamically ([Trinder et al., 2002](#)), with the attitudes, actions and interactions of the key family players shaping contact and determining its quality. Considering the evidence base on post-separation/divorce contact, this paper identifies and reflects critically on the key ingredients or factors central to the successful occurrence of 'quality contact'.

Addressing the issue of terminology, in family law, contact (or in the United States, access or visitation) is one of the general terms which denotes the level of contact a parent or other significant person in a child's life can have with that child. Contact forms part of the bundle of rights and privileges which a parent may have in relation to any child of the family. Following ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in most countries, the term access was superseded by the term "contact". For the purpose of this paper, while acknowledging the various terms employed in different jurisdictions, the term 'contact' will be used consistently throughout. Furthermore, as this paper is focused on reviewing the literature with a view to highlighting the key ingredients necessary for 'Quality Contact' to occur, the term contact refers to that which is organised informally by the parties involved and contact that is directed by the legal system where there are unresolvable disputes. Where contact is formally organised, this can involve supervised or supported facility. Many centres also offer exchange services, which essentially involves the dropping off and picking up of children under supervised conditions, but the actual visit itself takes place elsewhere and is not supervised ([Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006](#)).

## 1.2. Methods

The first stage in the identification of literature for inclusion in this study involved a comprehensive search of identified databases (Arts & Humanities Citation Index; BMJ Journals Online; CINAHL; Internurse; ISI Web of Knowledge; JSTOR; Psychological and Behavioral Sciences Collection; PsycINFO; PubMed; Social Science Citation Index). This was conducted using the key words 'quality contact', 'post-separation contact', 'parental separation', 'parent capacity', 'parental relations', 'family conflict', 'child contact', 'child custody disputes', 'access', 'visitation', 'supervised visitation', 'contact centres'. Secondly, this search was augmented with a review of the bibliographies of related articles, yielding a vast literature of over 250 articles, book chapters and research reports, in addition to key seminal texts. The third stage involved a review of the online abstract and bibliographic information of the journal articles and an assessment of the additional materials in order to identify selectively the material that directly addressed the question of how 'quality contact' could be achieved. This resulted in a total of 117 publications, 83 of which have been drawn on for this paper. These 83 publications informed the development of framework to illuminate and explore the complex and dynamic factors quality contact is dependent upon this is set out in the next section). Only published work pertaining to the framework was included in the final set of 83 publications. As this study was exploring the factors considered key for quality contact to occur, all of the available studies were not included, as the purpose of this paper was not to review those studies, rather to consider the issue of quality contact. Both primary (qualitative and quantitative) research and literature reviews were included. Finally, while the majority of the publications included in the review were gender specific referring to non-resident parents as fathers, reflecting the predominant post-separation arrangement in most jurisdictions, a small number of studies were non-gender specific, including in their sample, post-separation arrangements involving both mothers and fathers as non-resident parents. This was particularly relevant for the second and third layer of

the framework with almost all literature drawn on for the first and fourth layer dominated by post-separation arrangements where the father was the non-resident parent.

The geographical spread of the material included in the review was dominated by UK material (31 publications) following by North America (23 publications), Ireland (9 publications), Canada (8 publications), Australia (6 publications), Israel (2 publications), with one publication coming from New Zealand, Sweden, Norway and France. Given that the primary inclusion criteria for this literature review concerned only papers relevant to the framework, it is not considered likely that the geographical distribution of included publications affected the findings.

## 1.3. Quality contact

Drawing on the available literature, a framework<sup>1</sup> consisting of four separate yet interrelated layers has been constructed in order to illuminate and explore the complex and dynamic factors quality contact is dependent upon. These four components are as follows:

1. Situational and socio-demographic factors, including income, education, geographic location, and the age and gender of the children;
2. Attitudinal factors, including attitude and commitment to post-separation parenting, parenting capacity and style, including the capacity for flexible responses to children's changing needs; and ability to separate out their parenting and partnering roles and the influence of emotional, drug/alcohol or inter-personal violence problems on parenting capacity;
3. Relational factors, including the quality of the parent-child relationship, both pre and post-separation; the inter-parental relationship and capacity for co-parenting; and the arrival of new partners and/or new children; and
4. Supportive and regulatory factors, including the involvement and availability of contact centres, provision of family assessments, central to which is ascertaining the views and wishes of the child, and the issue of legal enforcement.

With the exception of a very small number of papers focusing on both mothers and fathers as non-resident parents ([Trinder et al., 2006](#) for example), or on research conducted on contact arrangements between children in care and their parents, the majority of research conducted on post-separation/divorce contact is with families where the non-resident parent is the father. While some of the factors referred to in the framework on quality contact are not gender specific, the research drawn on to support the framework is largely gender specific. Specifically, the research on domestic violence and post-separation contact is gender specific and refers to men as perpetrators and women as victims. It also understands the non-resident parent to be the father.

### 1.3.1. Situational and socio-demographic factors

Significant amongst these factors is the fathers' socioeconomic status, which the research systematically identifies as an important determinant of his continued involvement with his children following a parental relationship breakdown ([Baum, 2004](#); [Hunt & Roberts, 2004](#)). Income is deemed a crucial factor on a number of fronts. At a most practical level, the often costly nature of activities separated fathers end up participating in with their children, demands an adequate income to support contact ([Stephens, 1996](#)). In agreement, [Parkinson and Smyth \(2004\)](#) suggest that both the financial costs of contact and the infrastructure necessarily associated with having children overnight and for extended periods, may result in infrequent contact. The father's habitual location is also related to income with money supporting travel and telephone calls ([King & Heard, 1999](#)).

<sup>1</sup> This framework was constructed by the author from the literature, influenced predominantly by the work of [Cooksey and Craig \(1998\)](#) and [Trinder et al. \(2002\)](#).

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